

## **KILLING IN THE NAME OF THE OTHER**

### **A Lacanian Analysis of the Cinematic Serial Killer**

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Drawing on Jacques Lacan's writings, 'Killing in the Name of the Other' looks to illustrate the way in which the child's movement through the mirror phase has been thematised in the development of the cinematic serial killers. In this process the serial killer is diagnosed with the psychopathological structure of the pervert. Through the lens of the analyst, the serial killer is reconstructed as the ultimate legal subject — a subject who kills in the name of an Unconscious Law.

#### **Pleasure in Pain**

We take some pleasure in witnessing the operation of the rule of law — its establishment, transgression and enforcement. This may be why our television gaze seems fixated on programs like *Judge Judy* — she allows us to elevate the position of the law to that of a cruel dominatrix whose orders must be obeyed. Our enjoyment is located in the act of violence, the moment at which the obscene underside of the law grinds down upon submissive subjects. The cinematic serial killer also derives some pleasure from the law. Let's explore

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First let us problematise one of mass culture's more recent and most loved creatures — the serial killer. What distinguishes our obsession with the serial killer from our now passé attitude towards the obscene killing-creatures of the late 1970s and 1980s — the 'slashers'? What constitutes the shift towards our embracing of a pathological subject over the latent appeal of an automaton?

#### **The Slasher's Ruse: A Tale of the Attainable Other**

Being alive or being a 'living-dead' is more than just a technique of horror, it is also one of the first points at which the slasher film diverges from the serial killer film. The slasher film typically revolves around an emotionless monster-like subject, obsessed with satisfying a need to kill. In Lacanian terms, the killing subject represents 'a traumatic presence of a surplus of the Real over

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the Symbolic'.<sup>1</sup> It is, however, within this symbolic space that the slasher films' process of enunciation begins to assume form. It is here that the scene becomes set for the absolute dominance of what Freud has called the 'pleasure principle' — that is, the principle that describes a subject's relentless drive towards the attainment of the object of desire.<sup>2</sup> The crucial point here is that the pleasure principle describes the single-minded operation of the subject without any consideration of the limitations imposed upon it by reality; at this stage of Freud's schema, no external considerations (such as self-preservation) enter the subject's reality. Possessed by drive and blind to all other influences, are we not precisely describing the typical 'living-dead' subject of a slasher film? Within the sanctum of the slasher film, the fantasy of the pleasure principle is free to run its course. In this sense, slasher films may be the postmodern manifestation of the playing-out of the pleasure principle *par excellence*.

The slasher film makes cunning use of its ideological underpinnings. Revolving around pure desire, the slasher film immediately markets its subliminal appeal to the unsuspecting viewer by manipulating the split nature of the viewer's desire.

Psychoanalysis teaches us that desire has two objects, one Real and one Symbolic.<sup>3</sup> This split between the unattainable and the attainable is temporarily fused by the slasher film as it plays on the ruse that the object of desire (the Other) somehow embodies both the Real and the Symbolic — that is, the *actual* desired object itself and its signifier. The slasher film presents the possibility of an impossibility — that is, of full satisfaction. This is the ultimate fantasy: that I am a only step from the reattainment of the bond with forever lost (M)Other. This fantasy is fed to the viewer who immediately identifies with the slasher's objective and becomes enveloped in the movement of the drive towards the object. This fantasy, however, masks a fatal underside, the presence of which must be hidden from the viewer if the slasher film is to succeed. This element of danger consists in the possibility that the fantasy will necessitate a fatal rupture in the surface of the Lack — the element of loss originally confronted in the mirror stage, the moment in which the realities of the Lack infuse the subject's constitution of itself (I) with an indispensable conception of being apart from the Mother — I am something other than the (M)Other itself. The mirror stage allows the ego to shape the subject's understanding of self as a separate entity from the (M)Other.<sup>4</sup> The consequences of a later unification would therefore be catastrophic; it would necessitate a destruction of the subject's conception of itself. The ultimate

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed and expansive application of this psychoanalytic concept to cinema, see S Zizek (1992) 'In His Bold Gaze My Ruin Is Writ Large' in S Zizek (ed) *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock*, Verso.

<sup>2</sup> See S Zizek (1992) *Enjoy Your Symptom*, Routledge.

<sup>3</sup> See further E Grosz (1990) *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Perspective*, Routledge, p 67

<sup>4</sup> Grosz (1990) pp 24–49.

fantasy being played out in the slasher film is therefore also the ultimate tale of suicide.

### *The Unbearable Presence of the Contingency*

Where does the locus of terror reside in a typical slasher film? The answer to this question lies in the constitution of the slasher himself.

The killing subject in a typical slasher film is driven towards the attainment/killing of the desired Other(s). Generally focused on this goal, the killer operates in an Other-obsessed automaton-like state. The slasher genre features a peculiar feature of terror that is illustrated here with the help of a slasher text — John Carpenter's 1979 *Halloween*.<sup>5</sup> In *Halloween*, one of the most enduring images of the film is the first scene, in which the viewer, having observed the gruesome details of a series of murders, is suddenly confronted with the identity of the killer, a young child. The picture of innocence and normality represented by the child is radically incompatible with the preceding campaign of terror. Upon incarceration, and subsequent escape from a mental hospital, the killer's psychiatrist comments:

I've watched him for fifteen years sitting in a room staring at a wall, not seeing the wall, look past the wall, looking at this night — inhumanely patient. Waiting for some secret silent alarm to trigger him off, death has come to your little town sheriff ...

Throughout the course of the film, the psychiatrist makes it clear that the killer defies explanation; despite having been studied for fifteen years, the killer has never uttered a word nor provided any insight into his pathology. This peculiar aspect of *Halloween* is a recurring theme of many films of the slasher genre — the viewer is not given an adequate psychological explanation for the slasher's terrifying behaviour. Without an explanation, the viewer is forced to deal with the idea that it is not that the psychiatrist has failed to unearth a traumatic cause, but rather there is no cause in itself. It is not that such killers are trapped by an underlying trauma but rather that there *never was* such an underlying trauma. At this point it becomes apparent that trauma-fantasy has failed to coincide with reality. Without any unspoken influences on reality, we are left with an *object of the drive* — we may be tempted to say drive itself. Here we locate the major feature of terror in the slasher film: the radically contingent constitution of the subject. Terror resides in the idea that somehow, without explanation, a subject can become Other-obsessed — it could be the person in the row behind me or even worse it could be the person in me! This 'without explanation' crossing over into the realm of pure drive is also the elementary feature that distinguishes films in the pure slasher genre from 'diabolical horror' films that locate the terror in the act of possession

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<sup>5</sup> John Carpenter (1979) *Halloween*, Anchor Bay Entertainment.

rather than in the consequences of an inexplicable possession itself.<sup>6</sup> The individualisation of the contingency is thus the point at which the terror in a slasher film emerges to confront the viewer.

### *Perpetual Drive and the Dissatisfied Subject*

Returning to our thesis that the fantasy being played out in a slasher film is also ultimately a tale of suicide, we can witness the way in which the drive toward death has ultimately doomed the slasher genre.<sup>7</sup>

The fulfilment of the drive is unfortunately constitutionally incompatible with the chosen narrative events of most films in the slasher genre. At the conclusion of such films, the drive appears to remain unfulfilled: the killer always appears to want more — slipping away into the dead of night to live to kill another day! This seems nonsensical, as the entire space within the slasher's 'symbolic universe has been curved to meet the Other at the point of satisfaction'.<sup>8</sup> Why now does the killer appear to remain unsatisfied? To answer this question, we are tempted to claim that the closed circuit of the pleasure principle has suddenly been infiltrated by the notion of self-preservation — the slasher has realised that if he actually attains his objective he will be destroyed. Despite the obvious neatness of this explanation, we must not overlook the fact that at the conclusion of most slasher films, the slasher's objects of desire are all dead, the objective has been obtained and yet the slasher is not destroyed. This startling fact brings to light the unbearable notion that the slasher film was really nothing more than a blood-filled documentary of everyday life. Every day we are forced to face the Real of the object of desire being a substitutable object — even if we attain the object today we want more, we also want to live to kill another day. By forcing the viewer into a confrontation with the Real of remaining unfulfilled/apart from the Other the viewer must once again deal with the Real of the lack and return to visit the trauma of the mirror stage where the lack is discovered in all its horrible presence. The promised fulfilment of desire has been snatched back into the realm of the Other.

The slasher film therefore operates around a phantasmic background that serves to prop up an onscreen fairytale. This background presents the viewer with a fantasy that bypasses the truly impossible nature of the relationship between the subject and the Other. In doing so, the slasher film temporarily repositions the locus of *jouissance*, removing it from its realm of pleasure in the impossible (the supremacy of the impossible object) and relocating it at the actual intersection between desire and the Other (the moment of death of the

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<sup>6</sup> Such as Stanley Kubrick (1980) *The Shining*, Warner Bros. Here the possession is neither subtle nor unexplainable; it exists in all its horrifying presence — it is the act of terror in itself.

<sup>7</sup> Films of the slasher genre declined in production steadily throughout the 1980s.

<sup>8</sup> The author acknowledges a debt for this concept of 'curved space'. See Žižek (1992) p 47.

Other — the perceived moment of satisfaction).<sup>9</sup> The slasher film therefore popularises the myth that enjoyment correlates with satisfaction — the fantasy *par excellence*. Once it becomes clear to the viewer that the drive does not stop, it also becomes clear that the slasher must remain dissatisfied. These discoveries precede the unbearable realisation that, all along, the viewer was holding out in the hope that enjoyment and fulfilment would simultaneously collide into one giant mass of pleasure. The viewer therefore gives up the possibility of *jouissance* by making an unconscious investment in the drive of the onscreen killer. The slasher film thereby succeeds in trapping the viewers' interest but ultimately fails in bringing them back for more.

### Beyond the Pleasure Principle

Freud's point in his work described as *Beyond The Pleasure Principle* is that:

there is something in the very immanent functioning of the psyche, notwithstanding the pressure of 'external reality' which resists full satisfaction. In other words even if the psychic apparatus is entirely left to itself, it will not attain the balance for which the pleasure principle strives but will continue to circulate around a traumatic intruder in its interior.<sup>10</sup>

As Žizek points out, this traumatic intruder is none other than Lacan's *object a* — that is, the cause and the object of desire.<sup>11</sup> It is this object that will function as an inherent impediment to the fulfilment of the subjects' desire, it 'prevents the circle of pleasure from closing'.<sup>12</sup> The notion of the *object a* introduces the axis around which, as we shall see, the serial killer film revolves away from the slasher film.

As a manifestation of the drive itself, a slasher film will ultimately exclude all intrusions of reality upon the killer — have you ever wondered why these killers seem impervious to beatings and bullets? Reality in the slasher film is something that is imposed upon the killer, it is something that exists in its own right and merely collides with the functioning of the drive from scene to scene. As we have observed, the slasher film holds out the possibility of full satisfaction, and in this sense it remains in the realm of the pleasure principle; it cannot be read through the lens of Freud's work 'beyond the pleasure principle'. This is so because the slasher fantasy requires the denial of the true nature of the *object a*, for it is this object that presents an internal, insurmountable hurdle to the drive. The slasher film will foreclose the fact that the reality that will collide and ultimately derail the drive is the reality

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<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of the concept of *jouissance* and the unconscious, see Juan-David Nasio (1998) *Five Lessons on the Psychoanalytic Theory of Jacques Lacan*, State University of New York Press.

<sup>10</sup> Žizek (1992) p 47.

<sup>11</sup> *Object a* is discussed in detail in Nasio (1998) pp 73–95.

<sup>12</sup> Žizek (1992) p 47.

that comes from *within* the circuit of the pleasure principle.<sup>13</sup> That is, the ultimate failure of the slasher to satisfy his desire is a failure attributable to the presence of the object of desire itself. If this was to be known, the phantasmic background in a slasher film would disintegrate before the onscreen conclusion.

### *The Necessity of Playing Hard to Get*

The serial killer film turns to face the Real of the gap that separates the subject from the object. Rather than focusing on the possibility of closing the gap, the serial killer text deals directly with the impossibilities that persist within the gap itself. In dwelling in this space that maintains desire, the serial killer text moves out of the realm of the pleasure principle and travels 'beyond the pleasure principle' to the point at which we are forced to take account of the radical presence of the object-impediment.<sup>14</sup>

The intrusion of the object-impediment into the scheme provides the serial killer with a way in which he can guarantee the fulfilment of his pathological strategy. This involves the serial killer attempting to assume the position of the Other's *object a*. Why would a serial killer embark on such a mission? The answer lies with reference to the serial killer's pathological structure. Crucial in comprehending the bizarre role of the serial killer within this complex schema is the process of mapping the location of *jouissance* within the widened picture of the pleasure principle. How a subject (here the serial killer) extracts *jouissance* provides a crucial insight into the psychopathological structure of the individual.<sup>15</sup> To find enjoyment, we must gaze at the positive dimension of the inherent object-impediment, and then ask ourselves how the serial killer uses this object for his own purposes.

If the Thing (the *object a* elevated to the position of the Sublime)<sup>16</sup> prevents the circle of pleasure from closing, it is said to 'introduce an irreducible displeasure'; however, 'the psychic apparatus finds a sort of perverse pleasure *in this displeasure itself*, in the never-ending, repeated circulation around the unattainable, always missed object'.<sup>17</sup> The Lacanian name for this 'pleasure in pain' is, of course, enjoyment (*jouissance*).<sup>18</sup> Turning to psychoanalysis, we can see that the ability to derive *jouissance* from the failure in the attainment of the Other falls squarely under one of Lacan's four psychic structures: the structure of perversion or *pere-version*.<sup>19</sup> *Pere* (Father) occupies a central role in this psychopathology. The Father in psychoanalytic

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Zizek often refers to the *object a* as the object-impediment: see Zizek (1992) p 128.

<sup>15</sup> See Philip Hill (1997) *Lacan For Beginners*, Writers and Readers Publishing Inc.

<sup>16</sup> The Sublime is analysed further in Slavoj Zizek (1997) *The Plague of Fantasies*, Verso pp 213–41.

<sup>17</sup> Zizek (1992) p 47.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.* p 48.

<sup>19</sup> Hill (1997) p 102.

theory submits the narcissistic couple (mother/child) to the rule of the paternal law by prohibiting the child's access to the Mother. Up until this point, the Mother and the child share a special relationship where the child fulfils a phallic function for the Mother and the Mother gratifies the child's needs, thereby allowing the child to avoid the acknowledgment of the Lack of the Mother.<sup>20</sup>

Upon the entry of the Father and the rule of law, the child faces symbolic castration. This is the point at which a 'normal' subject will renounce his desire for the (M)Other because of a fear for the loss of his own phallus and a desire to be the possessor of this instrument of power. By this stage, the child has recognised the Father as the possessor of the Phallus and the Mother as a castrated subject.<sup>21</sup>

A child who has the psychopathological structure of perversion does not take this path. This child desires to be able to continue his special symbiotic relationship with the Mother and avoid the confrontation with the Lack.<sup>22</sup> To do so, he must reject the threat of his own castration in order to continue to fulfil his phallic function for the mother. The child does this by disavowal — the process whereby he demands that the Mother have a phallus of her own despite her obvious biological Lack.<sup>23</sup> To believe that the Mother has the phallus the child will often substitute an object for the maternal phallus; this object substitution will often create a fetish for such items — for example, shoes.<sup>24</sup> Through the process of disavowal, the child can ward off threats to his own organ. It can be described as the child proclaiming to the Father 'you can't cut off what I don't have!' This has unfortunate complicating consequences, as the child is now left in a seemingly futile position — 'if I don't have the phallus how can I continue to be desired by the (M)Other?' The child appears to have miscalculated the result of his disavowal. How can he continue to fulfil his object-function? Lacan rephrases this crisis:

The whole problem of the perversions consists in conceiving how the child, in his relation to the mother, a relation constituted in analysis not by his vital dependence on her but by his dependence on her love, that is to say, by the desire for her desire, identifies himself with the imaginary object of this desire in so far as the mother herself symbolizes it in the phallus.<sup>25</sup>

Grosz points out that, in 'normal' circumstances, the solution to this dilemma is an acknowledgment by the child of the paternal Law — the child accepts that he must give up his desires for the Mother with the reward being the elevation of the penis to the status of the object of desire for the

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<sup>20</sup> Grosz (1990) p 67.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.* p 68.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.* p 118.

<sup>23</sup> Hill (1997) pp 102–8.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.* p 108.

<sup>25</sup> Jacques Ecrits Lacan (1997) *A Selection*, Tavistock, pp 197–98.

(M)Other.<sup>26</sup> The child therefore gives up his desire in order to become the bearer of the desired object of the (M)Other. In this sense, the child is submitting to the law of the Father. The child with the psychic structure of perversion believes that the (M)Other possesses the phallus. This belief leads to the construction of the penis as an approximation of the phallus; the penis is seen as a borrowed piece of the phallus that the (M)Other is seen to rightfully own. The child therefore maintains the disavowal and must work to attract the gaze of the (M)Other. Through this network, the child succeeds in the creation of a web of desire that is spun between the child and the (M)Other, with each party believing that the Other is the true bearer of the desired object/phallus. Desire in this network flows in and out in a network of the unconscious. This exemplifies one of Lacan's fundamental concepts — 'the unconscious is a language that connects'.<sup>27</sup>

One final point must be made about the law in the structure of the perversions: perversion demands the presence of the law. The prohibition that allows the child to give up his desire for the (M)Other also allows him to obtain a slice of the approximated phallus and therefore assume the position of the object of desire. This position breaches the paternal order. The pervert thus longs for the very rule of law in order to effectuate his desire to attract the Other and to transgress the boundaries thereafter. The pervert is therefore the legal subject; he is defined, confined and dependent upon the law and its transgression for his perverse existence.<sup>28</sup>

The defining trait of perversion can be stated succinctly: it is the desire to be in the position of the object-cause of desire — the position of the *object a*. Of course, the pervert can never actually assume this position, as the object-cause is an object located deep within the psyche, stemming from a radical Lack. In this sense, it may be more accurate to describe the actual position of the pervert as the object. Whatever the realities of the Symbolic situation, it is important to us to see the consequences that flow from the individual assuming the position of object. These consequences follow the logic of the symptom where the individual 'acts but cannot explain'. Here we see the pervert working incessantly and symptomatically to maintain his elevated status as the perceived object of the Other's desire. The consequence of this is that the pervert generates a constant flow of *jouissance* as within the circuit of the pleasure principle the pervert desires, fails to obtain and then discovers a perverse pleasure in this displeasure itself. In this sense, the pervert is forever slave to the Other.

What are we to make of the discourse up to this point? The answer to this question persists in the opposition between the pleasure principle and beyond the pleasure principle. To rely on our chosen textual exemplification, we can say that the slasher film embodies the pleasure principle without the Real of

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<sup>26</sup> Grosz (1990) p 119.

<sup>27</sup> Nasio (1998) p 24.

<sup>28</sup> The author duly acknowledges the contribution made by Slavoj Žižek to the relationship between the law and the subject in the context of the perversions. See Žižek (1997) p 14.



the *object a*, whereas the serial killer film moves beyond the pleasure principle to not only take account of this object, but utilise it at the heart of the text. This is so because the pathology that constitutes a serial killer's universe is none other than the pathology of a pervert! That means that the serial killer has relied upon the object-impediment to fulfil his perverse strategy. By starting at this point, every action, intervention and intrusion within a serial killer text is now laid bare to a no holds barred symptomatic Lacanian reading.

### The Whisper of the Anal Father

The supreme example of perversion may be none other than Hitchcock's Norman Bates from the classic film *Psycho*.<sup>29</sup> Bates is a particularly unique pervert insofar as his Symbolic universe is constituted by only one Other — the Mother. Many perverts will labour in the belief that their efforts are being appreciated by an absent-enjoyer, a type of suspended master; however, Bates intimately knows his Other.<sup>30</sup> The fact that this Other truly is The Other (the Mother) makes Bates the pervert and the Oedipal subject *par excellence*. The progression of our knowledge of Bates' past and present actions through the film mirrors the progression of the child pervert-to-be, from the mirror stage to the stage at which he makes a disingenuous acceptance of the law. However, Bates is a truly bizarre subject as we find him dragging his mother's ragged, dry corpse through the house. If Bates is a pervert, he is one pervert worthy of a Lacanian analysis.

At the mirror stage, the child will recognise himself as a unified totality that exists independently and apart from the Mother. The ego will then begin to mediate the trauma of discovering this Lack.<sup>31</sup> Without revisiting the above analysis of perversion, it is suffice to say here that the pervert will initially refuse to accept the trauma of the mirror-stage and demand to maintain his privileged status and special relationship with the Mother. Later the child will make the pragmatic decision to accept the Symbolic authority of the Father's law in order to take for himself a slice of the approximated phallus. If we locate Bates within this schema, we can see that Bates refuses to accept the authority of the Father just as he refuses to accept the realities of the mirror. Bates believes that he is still within the confines of the special relationship with his Mother.

Freud invokes the image of the 'dead father' whose death leads to the prohibition of the incestuous relationship. The dead father has been 'murdered by the primal fraternal horde'<sup>32</sup> and in his murder he founds an inexorable law, as Lacan states: 'if this murder is the fruitful moment of the debt through which the subject binds himself for life to the Law ... the symbolic father, is so far as he signifies this Law, is certainly the dead Father'.<sup>33</sup> Zizek points out that

<sup>29</sup> Alfred Hitchcock (1960) *Psycho*, Paramount Pictures.

<sup>30</sup> For an elementary discussion of the Master-Slave discourse, see Hill (1997) p 86.

<sup>31</sup> See Grosz (1990) pp 24-49.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.* p 69.

<sup>33</sup> Lacan (1997) p 199.

postmodernism focuses on the Father who is still alive, the Father who has not yet died and therefore whispers to the child, go on — enjoy! Zizek calls this Father the Anal Father.<sup>34</sup> The Anal Father has whispered to Bates. As a pervert, Bates is enjoying himself in the Lacanian sense of the word and the Anal Father reigns supreme in Bates' universe, compelling his rejection of the authority of the Law and the playing out of his Oedipal complex outside of the boundaries of the Symbolic Law.

We can see that, as a peculiar type of pervert, Bates lacks some of the usual characteristics, but he has what is perhaps the crucial characteristic — he works incessantly for the Other. In psychoanalysis, the subject posits reality, it does not exist objectively. Bates' reality is the reality of the pre-mirror trauma — the (once) reality of the special relationship. Bates must work incessantly for his Mother's desire in order to prop up his reality. Even in her death, Bates must continue to support his fantasy. This is why we find Bates clinging to his Mother's dead body and in its absence embodying his Mother through her speech and clothing. We are horrified at the same thing that Bates demands — the overwhelming presence of the (M)Other.

The final scenes of *Psycho* allude to the way in which Bates has progressively weeded out the presence of any competing objects of desire within in the perimeter of his Mother's gaze. It suddenly becomes apparent that Bates really is a serial killer when the mysterious disappearances of the two Other men in his Mother's life are linked to Bates. This is no surprise to us as Bates must keep himself the privileged object of his Mother's affection if his reality is to remain intact. This is also why Bates scolds himself for allowing his desire for Marion to manifest itself in his overtly kind actions — for the relationship to succeed, it must be exclusively monogamous. Bates must therefore also kill Marion in order to prevent her from threatening the Symbolic Order any further. Literally anyone who threatens this sacred Order will end up dead at the hands of Bates — witness Detective Arbogast's murder in splendid style.

If we now go on to introduce the concept of the Anal Object, we can add yet another piece on to the serial killer's world. This piece seeks to shed some light on the role that the victim occupies within the serial killer's Symbolic Order. In *Psycho*, we have seen the contingency of the victim — simply a person who enters the confines of the Symbolic Order in the wrong place and at the wrong time. With the introduction of the Anal Object, we can also begin to develop a view of the victim as a crucial support mechanism that must necessarily enter the frame of the killer's universe in order to prop up the killer's impossible, perverse project.

### The Illusion of the Anal Object

In the realm of the Anal we find that we can offer an explanation of exactly what it is that is occurring in a serial killer text. When we find ourselves asking why Buffalo Bill in *The Silence of the Lambs*<sup>35</sup> has been killing these women,

<sup>34</sup> Zizek (1992) p 124.

<sup>35</sup> Jonathan Demme (1991) *The Silence of the Lambs*, Orion Pictures Corporation.

we immediately locate some sick need being played out by the deaths. Here we are both right and wrong. The sick need being satisfied does not revolve around the entry of the knife into the victim's body — the act of death itself is not the key. Rather, what we must look to is the reason behind the killings; we must attempt to locate what we have termed the 'impossible project' being embarked upon by the killer. In a serial killer text, this project will account for virtually all of the killer's behaviour.

In Freudian theory, the so-called pregenital (anal) object prevents the development of a normal sexual relationship:

in Lacanian theory however, the object is not what hinders the advent of the sexual relationship, as a kind of perspective error makes us believe. The object is on the contrary a filler, that which fills in the relationship which does not exist and bestows on it its fantasmatic consistency. Sexual relationship is in itself impossible, hindered, and the object does nothing but materialize this 'original' impossibility ... the 'perspective error' consists in conceiving it as a stumbling block to the emergence of the 'full' sexual relationship — as if, without this troublesome intruder, the sexual relationship would be possible in its intact fullness.<sup>36</sup>

What we can discern here is the illusion that the Anal Object is somehow an impediment to the attainment of a unified whole. Like the *object a*, we once again encounter the presence of a traumatic intruder, and like the *object a*, we can once again mobilise the object in explanation of the serial killer.

A serial killer's universe is made up of objects. As a pervert, the serial killer occupies the position of an object — the little object. In labouring for the desire of the Other, the serial killer perceives his task within the scheme of desire as being constituted by a series of steps that will ultimately lead to the perceived harmony, the moment when the gap is closed. This is why the serial killer is patient and cunning in his methodology — everything is geared towards extracting the Anal Object. The serial killer is trapped by the Freudian illusion of the Anal Object. In the current political climate, the Australian government can be seen to be labouring under the same 'perspective error'. In regard to Aboriginal reconciliation, the policy seems to be motivated towards doing those things necessary to achieve reconciliation. It is as if an apology by the federal government will precipitate our awaking to a utopia of racial harmony. It is as if there is merely a series of Anal Objects blocking our path towards unifying the Australian society. In a similar fashion, our favourite son Buffalo Bill from *The Silence of the Lambs* invests gender with the status of Anal Object.

As a pervert, Buffalo Bill desperately craves the desire of the Other. As a man, the strategy here should be straightforward: like the dance of the Peacock, Bill should merely have to display the presence of his approximated phallic power in order to attract the gaze of the female Other. In Bill's case, his task is made more complicated by his gender dysphoria. Rather than accepting his position within the Symbolic Order, Bill renounces the skin that signifies

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<sup>36</sup> Zizek (1992) p 89.

his gender and essentially claims to be a woman trapped in the cocoon of a man. Bill renounces his penis/approximated phallus and sees himself as being the bearer of the phallus itself — that is, Bill sees himself as occupying the position of the female Other but for the presence of his penis. It is the desire of the man that Bill ultimately craves. Bill's slavish devotion to dispensing with his male signifiers constitutes his entire contribution to the narrative events of the film. By being denied gender reassignment, Bill is denied the transformation of the body that he believes would deliver him the desire of the Other. Trapped, Bill must engage his handiwork on the sewing machine to attempt to reassign the signifiers that point to his gender. The killing that revolves around this task is merely a peripheral concern to Bill, who kills in order to complete the lady-suit that will guarantee him his desired status as object a of the male Other's desire and bearer of the phallus. The victim is therefore an essential component of Bill's world only insofar as a dead size 14 woman allows him to continue to strive for his perverse objective. The only thing standing in Bill's way is his current skin-suit.

Bill's universe is thus constituted by the illusion of the Anal Object — that is, if he can just change his appearance he will be able to assume his position as the Object of the Other's gaze and bearer of the phallus. Bill's 'perspective error' consists in his perception of skin as an Anal Object, an object that persists in thwarting the attainment of Bill's ultimate, perverse objective. The transformation of the chrysalis into a butterfly (Bill's chosen metaphor) is seen as a complete transformation — the moment that the soul leaves the dead body. This type of transformation may be what Bill is attempting to achieve by clothing himself in the female signifier, but what Bill fails to see is that the presence of various signifiers mirrors the ultimate impossibility of achieving a true transformation. Symptomatically cloaking himself in the lady-suit will only leave his disowned conception of gender trapped beneath the surface of yet another layer of cocoon or another layer of signifiers, for lack of the penis is merely (in the pervert's psychopathology) a signifier for the presence of the phallus, it is not the key to being the bearer of the phallus-in-itself. Layer after layer of female signifiers will fail to achieve a transformation into the role of the bearer of the phallus. Bill's futile project exemplifies another of Lacan's concepts, that 'a signifier is only a signifier for other signifiers'<sup>37</sup> — it has no meaning in itself.

Bill's undertakings highlight the notion that the Anal Object can be found in the gap that persists between the subject and the Other — the gap that sustains desire. The Anal Object is ultimately nothing more than an apparition invented by the subject to hide the Real of the Lacanian insight into Freud's work. What characterises a serial killer text is the notion that the perverse work that the killer is doing for the Other is always marked with an inherent stain of impossibility. The killer may be capable of assuming, or at least believing he is assuming, the position of the object of the Other's desire. The killer then embarks upon a project in the name of the Other which is designed to maintain or lead to the killer's status as the privileged object in the eyes of the Other. A

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<sup>37</sup> Nasio (1998) p 20.

serial killer is able to be defined as one whose impossible project necessitates murder in the name of the Other. The Anal Object intrudes as a guarantee that the killer will not only continue to enjoy his servitude but never fulfill his impossible project and never therefore question his devotion to the Other. It is precisely this impossible project that is a serial killer film.

These conclusions are worthy of a brief exemplification using David Fincher's 1995 release, *Seven*.<sup>38</sup> In this text, the serial killer, John Doe assumes the perverse position of the object of the Other's desire — Doe is the servant of God, the ultimate Other. Doe's impossible project is to maintain the popular fiction that it is only the sinners who prevent the establishment of God's Kingdom on Earth — a return to Eden. These sinners therefore assume the position of the Anal Objects who must be removed. This is no different to the Marxist struggle against the oppressing Capitalists who themselves seem to account for social inequality. The Capitalists are the Anal Objects who must be overthrown by revolution in order for our inequalities to disappear. Unfortunately Karl Marx never met Jacques Lacan — maybe he met Freud?

### The Banality of the Monstrous

Contrary to popular opinion, serial killers are not monsters, at least not in the sense of the word fashioned by modernity. Modernity has made monstrosity a function of experimentation — a figure that exists outside the Symbolic Order by virtue of a non-human entry into the world. What makes these monsters (like Frankenstein and Dracula) terrifying is their post-human qualities — for example, their superpowers/strength (Godzilla) or their appetite for human blood. In this sense, HR Giger's *Alien* was one of the last truly modern monsters to grip the popular imagination. The postmodern monster on the other hand is terrifying in its banality. In 1963, Hannah Arendt published the Report on the Banality of Evil entitled *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. In this publication, Arendt wrote:

[The prosecutor] wanted to try the most abnormal monster the world had ever seen ... [The Judges] knew, of course, that it would have been very comforting indeed to believe that Eichmann was a monster, even though if he had been Israel's case against him would have collapsed ... The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal.<sup>39</sup>

As Halberstam comments, 'monstrosity no longer coagulates into a specific body, a single face, a unique feature, it is replaced with a banality that fractures resistance because the enemy becomes harder and harder to locate, and looks more and more like the hero'.<sup>40</sup> Here we locate the crucial element

<sup>38</sup> David Fincher (1995) *Seven*, New Line Cinema.

<sup>39</sup> H Arendt (1963) *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, New York, p 276.

<sup>40</sup> Judith Halberstam, 'Skinflick: Posthuman Gender in Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs*', (1992) 27 *Camera Obscura* 37.

that compels us to define the serial killer as a representation of the postmodern monster. This element persists in the fact that serial killers are, like the soldiers/civil servants within the Nazi war-machine, undeniably banal yet terrifyingly destructive. Events like World War II have slowly transformed the monstrous from the realm of the superhuman into the realm of the strictly-human.

### *Killing Me Softly*

If we were faced with a choice between death at the hands of the slasher or death at the hands of the serial killer, surely we would choose the latter — even though we faced the prospect of having our livers eaten with a nice Chianti.

Our serial killers are all unquestionably banal — somehow less terrifying on their surface than the slasher: Hannibal Lecter, Normal Bates and of course the humorously named self-referential (postmodern) epitome of banality from *Seven* — John Doe. In each one of the texts, there exists an encounter where the serial killer exhibits his uncanny normality. In doing so, the killer raises a question in the viewer's mind along the lines of, 'is this guy really the killer?' This paradoxical role — transmitting conflicting signals to the viewer in both directions — is crucial to the staging of the moment of terror where the banality gives way to the evil that persists beneath the surface. This progression is signalled by a unifying feature of the serial killer text — introduction of the killer as 'something less than expected'.

An initial disappointment is raised in the viewer as, for example, Starling descends into what is metaphorically a medieval dungeon in the basement of The Baltimore State Correctional Hospital. Walking with Starling, subjective point of view shots heighten the viewer's excitement, moving cautiously towards Lecter's cell — such is the expectation of monstrosity. One would not have been surprised to discover Giger's *Alien* caged within. The viewer is disappointed to find a middle-aged, placid looking Lecter standing patiently. Trapped inside Lecter's polite exterior, the viewer is ultimately horrified to see Lecter bludgeon the policeman to death in graphic detail as Lecter stages his escape from his cage in a scene in the last chapter of the film. This particular event disrupts the viewer's identification with Lecter's hereunto-gentlemanly appeal.

The expectation of the monstrous is heightened to such an extent in *Seven* that the viewer scarcely has time to recover from the disappointment before John Doe is killed by Detective Mills. Having pursued Doe across numerous hideous murder scenes, we are finally confronted with a person whom — when he enters the police station — is soft-spoken, intelligent and eerily normal. *Seven* and *The Silence of the Lambs* thus develop two different trajectories of the contrast between banality and evil. In *The Silence of the Lambs*, the intrusion of evil hystericises the viewer due to Lecter's facade of normality, whereas in *Seven* the shock arrives with the intrusion of the banal as John Doe confesses to the hideous crimes which we assume could only have been perpetrated by an old-fashioned monster. Ultimately, these two trajectories

serve the same purpose: that is, to force the viewer into accepting the serial killer as the strictly-human postmodern monster *par excellence*.

### Locating Enjoyment

What lies behind the fascination with the serial killer that persists across the popular imagination? What lies behind the shift of the serial killer text from out of the borderline psychotic's basement and into the recommended section of the local bookstore? This question may be best suited to be answered by a cultural studies investigation; however, within the realm of a Lacanian analysis, the question sounds familiar: if serial killers have mobilised the popular psyche, surely a closer inspection would reveal some kind of *enjoyment*? The task then becomes clear: where is this enjoyment coming from and who is doing the enjoying?

### Suspended Enjoyment

Stained to the core with perversion, the serial killer's universe is built around a tireless servitude for the Other. If this servitude is stripped back, it reveals a perverse ideological plot that is being played out beneath the surface of a serial killer text. This plot is concerned with forcing the viewer to identify with an illegal mode of enjoyment — that is, the enjoyment that persists in transgressing the rule of law for and in the name of the Other.

The serial killer text quietly slips an additional piece on to the perversion paradigm and leaves it for the viewer to consume. The serial killer text is littered with traces of what Žižek has called 'surplus obedience'.<sup>41</sup> Surplus obedience entails the notion of going beyond what is expected. As we shall see later, this can also entail surpassing a formal duty to the Other. Here surplus obedience is being used in the strictly perverse sense — that is: 'I am not acting out of a demand *by* the Other but I am acting out of selfishness — acting for my own desires by volunteering my time in the name of the Other.' The flip side of surplus obedience will be encountered in the final section of this paper, where we *Travel the Moebius Band* in a regressive Lacanian reading of the serial killer genre.

In Fincher's *Seven*, this surplus obedience is made clear. By way of a side note, it is also worth pointing out that this text mobilises the killer's pathology as an element of terror — terror in the incomprehensible; terror in the fact that surely nobody could really be like that! In *Seven*, the first glimpse into the surplus of the killer's pathology arrives when it becomes apparent that a plastic strip discovered in the bloated stomach of 'Gluttony' (the first victim) contains a hidden meaning. Upon a return to the scene of the crime, Detective Somerset discovers the way in which the killer has led us to the dead man's epitaph: the word 'Gluttony' scratched into the wall behind the refrigerator. At this point, it becomes clear that this is the work of a serial killer — taking pride in the decorations that adorn the act of killing — presumably taking pride in the surplus as much as the act of killing itself.

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<sup>41</sup> Žižek (1997) p 56.

The progression of *Seven* slowly introduces the viewer to the pathological excesses of this particular serial killer. We begin to build up a picture of a methodological, library book-reading killer. This picture of banality continues to emerge simultaneously with the picture of terror being uncovered — a mutilated and dead whore, a sliced lawyer, a disfigured woman. Thus two radically incompatible versions of the same person are being fed to the viewer to force the viewer to reconcile the picture of excess devotion with the picture of grotesque violation. The viewer is compelled to be both impressed and repulsed. This mix serves to incite the viewer to watch on and turn away. For this antagonism to emerge, we must expect to find the presence of enjoyment. Where does the enjoyment reside?

The excessive obedience that serial killers display is one of the primary elements of a viewer's attraction to a serial killer text. The serial killer's universe is constituted by the overwhelming presence of enjoyment — enjoyment derived from the inherent and failure of the serial killer's project and enjoyment derived from the excess devotion to the Other. If the serial killer is generating a perverse form of enjoyment, then the way is opened for the viewer to take advantage of the suspended *jouissance* that permeates the text.

The viewer may therefore begin to toy with the possibility of stealing the enjoyment that the pervert/killer has generated as a by-product of his servitude. In a similar way that children steal spare timber from building sites, the viewer has the option of adopting the stance 'well he isn't using it why should I go without?' And after all, couldn't we all do with just a little more enjoyment? This transference of enjoyment is the 'juicy bit' that the viewer must either digest or reject — the bit that leaves the typical serial killer viewer occupying one of two positions: 'that was disgusting — I feel sick' or 'damn that movie was good'. This is ultimately the feeling that can only be generated after the text has run its course.

### Traversing the Fantasy in *The Silence of the Lambs*

In order to catch a serial killer, a pursuer must step into the killer's mind. Indeed, this process accounts for much of the narrative within *The Silence of the Lambs*. In this text, the relationship between Lecter and Starling is particularly complex, given the amount of exchange that is occurring between these subjects. As a pragmatist, Lecter understands that his only chance of leaving his glass cell is to assist Starling in catching Buffalo Bill. And as a psychiatrist,<sup>42</sup> Lecter — like Detective Somerset in *Seven* — understands that the only way to track a serial killer is to get inside their head. The problem faced by Lecter is that Starling represents an inadequate subject for the ordeal: she is a woman.

To get within the unconscious of a pervert like Bill, Starling would be required to renounce her position within the Symbolic Order, a position inextricably linked to her femininity and her position as a castrated subject. Within this unconscious web of desire, Starling (as an example of the pervert's

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<sup>42</sup> May we assume for our purposes that Lecter is a Lacanian psychiatrist?



Other) is the recipient of the pervert's gaze and the pervert (with the piece of the approximated phallus) is the object of her desire. To understand Bill's pathology, Starling would be forced to make a Symbolic rotation to occupy the position of the pervert. This is not to suggest that Starling or any other woman could never make such a shift but, as Starling proclaims, 'we're running out of time Doctor!' In the name of expediency, Lecter makes a pragmatic decision that involves leaving Starling's position in the Symbolic Order intact and necessitates Lecter guiding Starling's mind from within. Of course, the assistance that Lecter offers Starling in the case runs deeper than Lecter's desire to leave the cell or his obvious fondness for the eager undergraduate; it is a classic example of Lacan's formulation that the subject's desire is the desire of the other. In offering Starling his insight into Bill's psychology, Lecter's desire is coinciding with the desire of Starling — the desire to catch Bill before he kills his latest selection.

Working through the trauma is the exclusive domain of the psychiatrist. However, to manipulate the drive of a patient, the psychiatrist must treat the patient *symptomatically*. To do this, Lecter must understand what it is that drives Starling, what it is that causes her to act and to think in the way that she does. In other words, Lecter must find the motivating reason beneath Starling's obsession with catching Bill before he kills again. This is why Lecter proposes his *quid pro quo*: 'If I help you, Clarice, it will be turns with us too, *quid pro quo*, I tell you things, you tell me things, not about this case though, about yourself, *quid pro quo*, yes or no?' Lecter cares not about Starling's traumas for their own sake but, as a psychiatrist, requires their signification in order to influence the behaviour that results. In this sense, Starling is undergoing a Lacanian therapy at the hands of Lecter. What constitutes this therapy and what will the outcome be? Will — as Lecter asks Starling in the final scene — the lambs stop crying?

Buffalo Bill occupies the position of Starling's non-symbolised traumatic object-stain, the presence of which, as Zizek says, will hystericise the subject.<sup>43</sup> For Starling, Bill is a surplus-signifier that indicates the intrusion of the Real into Starling's Symbolic<sup>44</sup> In signifying her darkest trauma to Lecter, she necessitates the appearance of this stain. When Lecter asks Starling to recount her worst childhood memory, she immediately reveals the source of the Real. As a young child, she was helpless to do anything to prevent the death of her father at the hands of criminals. This act left her abandoned.

As a woman choosing a career in the FBI, she *symptomatically* acts out her longing for her childhood intervention at the precise moment when her father's life would be saved. If Starling can stop Bill, she can save her father. The trauma of the slaughtering of the lambs can be seen as signifying the crucial aspects of the death of Starling's father. That is, Starling was unable to prevent the death of the lambs/father and when she tried her helplessness was compounded by her inability to carry the young lamb/save her father. The crying of the lambs is therefore a signifier for her own crying over the death of

<sup>43</sup> Zizek (1992) p 239.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*

her father. If she catches Bill before he kills his latest selection, she will have finally *traversée du fantasme*.

Lecter works through the trauma with Starling by forcing its signification. As a psychiatrist, Lecter knows that this is the only way to alter the status of the underlying trauma and influence Starling's behaviour. By removing the traumatic kernel from the underlying fantasy, Lecter is able to provide Starling with the emotional equipment needed to face Buffalo Bill. When this confrontation finally does occur, the film clearly shows the way in which the traumatic presence of the object-stain will hystericise the subject. Despite this, it is clear to us that the therapy has been successful — Starling is able to face the traumatic Real and dispose of her trauma.

### Travelling the Moebius Band

In conclusion, we will look for the presence of the dark secret that is being played out in the serial killer text. To find this, we will have to regress from one side of the Moebius band to its traumatic reverse.<sup>45</sup>

Hannah Arendt's writings on the banality of evil serve our purpose well in drawing attention to the role of the serial killer as the new monster. However, as Žižek points out,<sup>46</sup> she does not take account of the crucial role that surplus obedience played in the Nazi apparatus. Having earlier embarked on an endeavor to illustrate the intersection between *jouissance* and surplus-obedience, we must ask ourselves whether it is merely a coincidence that the serial killer exhibits the same traits of secret enjoyment that we find if we look at historical events where people were mobilised in their masses in the name of the Other. The conclusion to be reached here is that in circumstances where we find ourselves labouring for the Other, we will necessarily reach a point where we will begin to derive a pleasure by excessively fulfilling our duty. The serial killer text therefore plays out the passage from one side of the Moebius band to the other — from the side that regulates the Symbolic Order under the name of the law to its obscene superegotistical reverse, the side that permits the transgression of the law in the name of the law itself, killing in the name of the Other — killing in the name of the Motherland.

By enticing the viewer to identify with the enjoyment that is derived from excessively serving the Other under the rule of law, the serial killer text forces a confrontation with the very mechanism of repression that has allowed the Western psyche the luxury of 'getting over' historical atrocities such as Nazi Germany or the American involvement in Vietnam. This mechanism revolves around the fiction that the actors involved in such events acted purely out of their duty to the Other. This explanation forecloses the possibility of surplus obedience and enjoyment that may derive from the fulfilment of the duty. This mechanism of justification becomes clearer when we take the American nationalistic slogan 'Uncle Sam Wants You'. If we apply this to the Vietnam conflict where we find documented accounts of American soldiers raping South

<sup>45</sup> The Moebius band is a concept used by Žižek in illustrating the movement from one side of an analysis to its reverse: Žižek (1992) p 226.

<sup>46</sup> Žižek (1997) p 55.

Vietnamese women and executing children, the mechanism would compel the soldiers' explanation: 'I did it for Uncle Sam'. When atrocities are called to account, it is the Other who is expected to absorb the blame. The justification lies within the unidentifiable realm of the Other where the law can be broken in the name of the law itself.

The serial killer text drags us back to face the unsettling possibility that maybe these people were, after all, enjoying what they were doing. If we were tempted to sample the lingering enjoyment that the serial killer generated, then we must face the more terrifying possibility that, under the right conditions, we could also find ourselves enjoying life on the reverse of the Moebius.